Evaluation of Canyons Community Schools Initiative: Findings after Two Years

Dawn Anderson-Butcher and Lauren Paluta

Executive Summary

For more information or a copy of the full report, contact Dawn Anderson-Butcher (Anderson-Butcher.1@osu.edu)
Ensuring all youth, especially those from the most vulnerable circumstances, succeed in school and transition to adulthood is a growing priority in the United States today. Innovative approaches to ensuring the right conditions are in place to support learning and development are needed. In 2012, the Utah State Office of Education (USOE) began supporting Canyons School District (CSD) with the adoption and implementation of new innovations at their four Title I elementary schools. Innovations included the development of a Community Schools framework, the expansion of a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), the adoption of a school-based approach to the delivery of mental health services, the addition of multiple positive youth development programs in-school and during the out-of-school time, and more. The integration of these evidence-based frameworks was guided by the Community Collaboration Model for School Improvement (CCSMI; Anderson-Butcher et al., 2008). Two years post-implementation, The Ohio State University’s Community and Youth Collaborative Institute (CAYCI) was contracted by the USOE to evaluate this work. This Executive Summary summarizes the findings of the evaluation.

As a result of CSD’s work, new and expanded strategies for supporting students and families were implemented across the five CCMSI pathways: Academics, parent and family engagement, youth development, health and social services, and community partnerships. New school-family-community partnerships were developed, and system-wide improvements were made. For example, a new referral system was adopted in each school, planning teams were strengthened, and new data systems were put in place to better inform ongoing improvement efforts.
Such system-wide improvements have contributed to an increase in the number of youth served in out-of-school time programming, an improvement in the quality of services delivered, and ultimately, marked improvement in several areas as shown in the figures featured here and explored more fully in the complete evaluation report. Academic achievement improved in three of the four buildings. Absenteeism and the number of office discipline referrals dropped significantly over the course of the two years. Teacher perceptions of school climate, teacher efficacy, the learning support system, and students “readiness to learn” were more favorable in 2014 than 2012. In some schools, parents/caregivers and youth perceptions were improved on key constructs such as parent involvement, student well-being, and quality of community supports.

Academic performance still remains below benchmarks and state averages despite progress made. Some of valuable services and structures put into place, such as the Care Team model for linkage and referral, now need to be refined to strengthen the overall student learning support system. Additional universal strategies are needed to address bullying, widespread internalizing symptomology, and the unique needs of the large portion of students for whom English is a second language. Needs are especially visible at one Title I school serving an especially vulnerable population of students.

While many needs remain unmet, a strong foundation for continued work has been established during the first two years of the CSD Community Number of Youth Receiving SBMH Services Each Month

This work has not gone unnoticed. CSD received the National Youth and Family Partnership Award from the National Center for School-Based Mental Health. The schools were approached by United Way of Salt Lake, and future partnerships will involve a deepened community engagement component. Still, much work remains to be done in light of the significant amount of need evident among the students and families served by the four schools.
Schools Initiative. From the beginning, there was a high level of readiness, buy-in, and commitment among school personnel and community partners. Leaders effectively used data to inform the direction of the Initiative and rally partners around a common vision. Professional development and consultation services, made possible with USOE funding, began to build the capacity of school, district, and community leaders. Such factors, which facilitated successes in the CSD process, will be important to replicate at other schools looking to become Community Schools.

In the years to come, it will be important that CSD build upon their foundation by supporting principals in the development of collaborative leadership skills, by integrating services still siloed due to role confusion and turf issues, and by creating better alignment of goals across the district. Certain barriers encountered during the first two years of the Initiative, such as the high levels of student mobility and need, will not easily dissipate. However, by recognizing and addressing the challenges that still lie ahead, CSD can further enhance this innovative work and ultimately better support school success.

Findings from CSD can serve as an example for other Utah schools wanting to similarly impact their students and communities. In fact, several examples already exist demonstrating how the learning that has occurred at CSD is being used by USOE to inform state-wide scale-up and replication. Moving forward equipped with the successes achieved and lessons learned from this pilot, USOE and its partners can work towards improving schools, promoting student learning, and fostering the overall healthy development of youth, families, and school communities across the state and beyond.